

STUDY 9

The Tabernacle—The Presence and the Glory

Hector Morrison

In this session we consider the tabernacle, which throughout Israel's early history was the dwelling place of God and one of the main foci of Israel's priestly vocation, indeed, the 'centre of Israel's worship'.

SANCTUARY, TABERNACLE AND TENT OF MEETING

Now, throughout the narrative in Exodus the tabernacle is designated using three different titles, each of which highlights particular aspects of the tabernacle and of the relationship between Yahweh and his people. The first of these titles is 'sanctuary' (cf. Exod. 25:8; Lev. 12:4; 21:12; etc.), a word which emphasises the holiness of Yahweh; and which requires that his people be holy too. A later paper will pick up this emphasis on holiness and in particular on the Church as the holy temple.

In Exodus the two more frequently used designations of the sanctuary are 'tabernacle' and 'tent of meeting'. The tabernacle (cf. Exod. 25:9; 26:1, 6, 7; etc.), from the Hebrew root 'to dwell' (*shakan*), is Yahweh's dwelling place, where he comes to stay among his covenant people—and comes to stay as their God (cf. Exod. 25:8; 29:45f.). The tabernacle, then, is God's tent, his house or home. It is the Father's house where he lives at the heart of his adopted family; it is the Bridegroom's home from which and to which he woos his bride, Israel; it is also the King's royal tent, where the Shepherd-King of Israel reigns over his people from his throne room in the Holy of Holies. That the tabernacle is the King's royal tent is evident from a variety of facts, not least that in Numbers chapter 2 this tent is set up at the very heart of the Israelite encampment, in the very place where the king's tent was erected in the encampments of the armies of Israel's neighbours.

The third designation for the sanctuary or tabernacle is the 'tent of meeting' (cf. Exod. 27:21; 28:43; 29:4; etc.), for there Yahweh promised to meet with Moses and speak to him (Exod. 29:42). There he also promised to meet with the Israelites (Exod. 29:43; 30:36). The tabernacle, then, was a meeting place between Yahweh and his covenant partner, Israel; a place of reconciliation between the heavenly Father and his prodigal son; a place of communion between the Bridegroom and his Bride. Yahweh did not stand aloof from his people. He came down to meet with

The Tabernacle—The Presence and the Glory

them; and drew them to meet with himself. Once again, through the tabernacle, humanity in Israel was given the privilege of living in the presence of the God of all the earth.

RETURN OF PRODIGAL HUMANITY TO THE FATHER'S HOUSE

As we saw in one of our earlier studies, humanity, in Adam, had failed in their priestly vocation in Eden and, consequently, were driven out from the presence of God. But, here, we find that the priestly community of Israel, this new, Adamic community, is now able to enter the tabernacle, the dwelling place of the holy God;¹ and they do so as the firstborn of the nations to be adopted into the family of God. Yahweh has enabled the Prodigal Son to come home to the Father's house, to the King's private garden, where (Ps. 36:8) they will feast in the abundance of his house, and drink from the river of his delights, from his Edenic streams. Yahweh has brought his son home to himself (cf. Exod. 19:4: 'I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself')—the gospel in the heart of the Old Testament.

Here, we see, in a very visible and tangible way the beginnings of the return of prodigal humanity to the Father's house. And here is no picture of a waiting Father, such as we have in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). Here the picture is of a Father who has heard the pained cry of his estranged son from the far country of Egypt and has come looking for him. It is the picture of a Shepherd-King who has come down to rescue his flock from the power of the evil oppressor, Pharaoh. It is the picture of the Bridegroom who has come to woo the Bride upon whom he has set his heart—to woo her away from her false 'lovers'. It is the picture of the living God who has liberated Israel for the specific purpose of 'service/worship' (cf. Exod. 4:23: 'Let my son go that he may worship me'; 7:26; 8:1, 20; etc.)—the word 'worship' being from the same Hebrew root ('*abhad* or '*avad*') as that used in Genesis 2 to describe the priestly service of Adam in the sanctuary of Eden. With the creation of the tabernacle, then, the judgements of God upon humanity are being reversed. God is turning once more in blessing towards humanity. The sanctuary of Eden is being opened up again. Once again Man can live in the presence of the living God; and the holy God can walk among humanity; he can meet with humanity; and they can meet with him, and live before him all their days.

The story of the building of the tabernacle is the story of creation being renewed. As long ago as 3,500 years, in the tabernacle there is an anticipation of that future world in which all things will be made new. When on the mountain of God at Sinai, Moses was shown the pattern for the tabernacle (Exod. 25:9, 40), he was being given a vision not unlike that received by the apostle John on the island of Patmos 1,500–1,600 years later. In that pattern, Moses saw the beginnings of the new heavens and the new earth; he saw heaven on earth; he saw Eden re-opened; he saw God dwelling there with humanity; he saw humanity worshipping the Father in the Father's house; etc.

¹ In Exodus 27:13ff. we learn that the entrance to the courtyard of the tabernacle was to be found on the east side. And we remind ourselves that the entrance to Eden was found in the same position, in the east, towards the sun-rising (cf. Gen. 3:24).

The Tabernacle—The Presence and the Glory

And Israel, of course, was but the firstborn son, the implication being that there were others to come; other nations who would yet belong to the family of God; other nations who would one day be brought near to live in the presence of this God. But, as with the firstfruits in later Israel, so the return of the firstborn to the Father's house here is an intimation of the rest of the harvest of the nations of the earth still to come. One day they too will be in the Father's house. And all of this is of grace, amazing grace, astonishing grace, extravagant grace!

EXTRAVAGANT GRACE TOWARDS A GROSSLY UNFAITHFUL PEOPLE

For the tabernacle was built not simply for an already redeemed and covenanted people. It was built for a grossly unfaithful people! For the actual building of the tabernacle is recorded for us not immediately after the instructions for building have been completed at the end of Exodus 31. The building begins only at chapter 35, in other words, **after** the great apostasy of the Golden Calf incident (chs 32–34), which we should regard not simply as a one-off incident in Israel's experience but rather as being typical of the way in which the firstborn son treated his heavenly Father, and of the way in which the Bride of Yahweh treated her Husband, throughout the whole of their life together.

Within days or weeks of the covenant marriage ceremony at Mt Sinai, Israel was prostituting herself with another god, one of her own making (Exod. 32:1ff.), so breaking her marriage vows, her covenant commitment. Before the Bridegroom had time to have a house built for them to share their life together, she had gone after another lover. Instead of listening to the voice of the Father, Aaron the High Priest listened to the voice of the people, resulting in a kind of re-run of the story of the High Priest of Eden in Genesis 3. But the Father did not close the doors of his house to apostate Israel. He did not drive them away from his presence. Instead, despite such desperate apostasy and horrendous unfaithfulness, God still chose to dwell among his people. Indeed, he had made provision for their waywardness before it ever happened!

After the incident with the Golden Calf, Israel did not deserve to enter the Father's house or presence ever again. But the Father took them in! And what an encouragement for those of us who have found ourselves in the place of unfaithfulness, even gross unfaithfulness, perhaps even immediately after profound revelations of the grace and love of the Father! As Brevard Childs says: 'If ever there were a danger of misunderstanding Sinai as a pact between partners, the positioning of Ex. 32–34 made clear that the foundation of covenant was, above all, divine mercy and forgiveness'.² In grace, mercy and forgiveness, the Father made sure that a house was built where he might meet with his redeemed and covenanted yet profoundly unfaithful son. And there Israel experienced the Father's presence and saw his glory, two themes that are in themselves immense, but which I wish to touch on only briefly at this point.

² B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, SCM Press, London, 1979, p. 176.

The Tabernacle—The Presence and the Glory

THE PLACE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

This is clear from all we have said already about God tabernacling or dwelling among his people. The people of Israel knew the 'Real Presence' of God with them. Where other nations had, in the innermost sanctuary of their temples, an idol of gold or some other precious metal, representing the attributes and character of their god, aniconic Israel had the living God of all the earth himself! The Shepherd-King, the Father, the Bridegroom was present with his people. He walked among them (Lev. 26:12) as he had done with Adam and Eve in Eden, and as Christ now walks among the seven golden candlesticks (Rev. 2:1; cf. also 1:12ff.).

And, certainly in their better moments, the people of Israel longed for that presence. They longed for the 'face' of God to be manifested in the tabernacle and later in the temple. They longed for a real encounter with God that would satisfy their spiritual thirst (cf. Ps. 63:1ff.; 84:1-4), while at other times they longed for the 'face' of God to act for their salvation. For example, in Psalm 80 they cry out: 'Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh . . . make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved' (this refrain is repeated again in vv. 7 and 19; cf. also Ps. 24:6; 27:8; 67:1ff.). In such contexts 'the face of God' refers to 'the presence of God without any reservation'³—God present among his people and for his people; God among his people to bless them and to discomfit their enemies at one and the same time.

HIS GUIDING PRESENCE

In the book of Exodus, the Presence of Yahweh is largely his guiding Presence. Remember Yahweh's great promise of commitment to Moses in Exodus 33:14: 'My presence will go with you . . .' Now that was most evident in his Presence in the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night (Exod. 40:36ff.), which the prophet Isaiah seems to regard as symbolic of the Presence of God through his Spirit (cf. Isa. 63:11-14, esp. vv. 11 and 14; cf. also Haggai 2:5). The Spirit of God, then, was their Shepherd-King going ahead of them, guiding their itinerary and their timetable much as he does still in our own day, though not so visibly present to us as he was to Israel of old. Nevertheless, as Paul teaches us in Romans 8:14, the liberated 'sons of God' 'are led by the Spirit of God', and it is for us to 'keep in step with the Spirit' (Gal. 5:26) as he prompts us forward from time to time, but also as he settles us where he would have us be. Often, what we need to do is 'wait on the LORD' (e.g. Ps. 27:14).

There is so much more we could say about God's Presence as, for example, a providing Presence (cf. Exod. 16; 17:1-7); a protecting Presence (cf. Exod. 17:8-15; Isa. 43:2); a comforting Presence (cf. Isa. 63:9; Ps. 23:4); a distinguishing Presence (cf. Exod. 33:16); and a holy Presence sometimes bringing chastisement and judgement (cf. Exod. 32:35).⁴

³ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1974, p. 78.

⁴ 'Yahweh is an awesome, demanding agent whose presence is not casual, trivial, incidental or ad hoc', W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 663.

The Tabernacle—The Presence and the Glory

And all of this must be part of the background against which we understand the words of the so-called ‘Great Commission’ (Matt. 28:18–20, esp. v. 20), in which the Shepherd–King with all power and authority says to us: ‘go and make disciples of all nations . . . baptising them . . . teaching them to obey . . . and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’. Immanuel, the Incarnate One, our Shepherd–King, Saviour, Husband and Elder Brother, is present with us through his Spirit. His face is turned toward us. He will provide for us on the way; he will protect, comfort and guide us; he will fight for us and grant us great victories along the way, as well as disciplining us, before finally bringing us to our—and his—resting place.

THE PLACE OF THE REVELATION OF GOD’S GLORY

Clearly, the tabernacle was not the only place of the revelation of God’s glory. It had already appeared to Israel in the desert the day God began to provide them with manna ‘from heaven’ (Exod. 16:7, 10). It had also settled on Mount Sinai at the time of the confirmation of the covenant in Exodus 24, when it appeared to Israel ‘like a consuming fire’ (vv. 16f.); while, in Exodus 33–34, it was proclaimed to Moses in terms of God’s ‘moral glory’ (cf. Exod. 33:18–34:7, esp. 34:6–7).

For the present, I simply want to direct your attention to the closing verses of Exodus, where the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34ff.). And I want you to notice that, throughout the scriptures, whenever a temple or dwelling place of God has been completed, the glory of God then comes to fill that sanctuary. We see this first of all in the case of the tabernacle. In Exodus 40:33 we read that ‘Moses finished the work’. Then in the following verse, we read that ‘the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.’ We find something similar happening with Solomon’s temple once the priests had brought the ark of the covenant into the completed temple (1 Kings 8:10f.). Again, when the prophet Ezekiel had his great vision of the future eschatological temple, he saw the glory of God returning to the temple (Ezek. 43:2ff.). When we come into the New Testament the same pattern appears. John tells us (1:14) that: ‘the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us [i.e. tabernacled among us]. We have seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth.’ Finally, in Revelation 21:10, John saw ‘the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God . . .’ Every true temple is filled with the glory of God. Ultimately, it appears from Revelation 21 that this is true of the very temple of creation. It too is filled with the glory of God.

This is something that is anticipated in a few Old Testament texts (cf. Hab. 2:14; Ps. 72:18f.; Num. 14:21–22) perhaps the clearest of which is Isaiah 6:3 where the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision cry out: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory’. In that vision, the ‘train of God’s robe’ that filled the temple parallels ‘the glory of God filling the earth’. As one is true, so also is the other. So Fretheim comments:

The Tabernacle—The Presence and the Glory

God's presence in the tabernacle is a statement about God's intended presence in the entire world. The glory manifest there is to stream out into the larger world. The shining of Moses' face in the wake of the experience of the divine glory (Ex. 34:29–35) is to become characteristic of Israel as a whole, a radiating out into the larger world of those glorious effects of God's dwelling among Israel. As a kingdom of priests, they have a role of mediating this glory to the entire cosmos'.⁵

That role, in which Israel so sadly failed, is one now taken up by the New Testament temple, as we will see in later papers.

But that is possible only because of the Great Temple, Jesus Christ who, on the cross, took into his own body, mind and being all the defilement of his people's spiritual idolatry and prostitution and there, for us, experienced the awful, deadly absence of the Presence as he cried out from the depths of his darkness, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

⁵ T. E. Fretheim *Exodus*, Interpretation, John Knox Press, 1991, pp. 271–2.